

EXHIBIT U

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Here you go, all the way up to Unkillable Beast.

Thanks!

Liz

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Chapter 86

I wake up to Macy dancing around the room to Shakira. She's still in her pajamas, and I can see a ton of bruises on her arms and upper back—thank you Dragon Boneyard—but she looks happy. Really happy, and I don't blame her.

Last night was crazy, and I'm feeling pretty glad to be alive, too, even though we're both running on fumes after—I glance at the clock—only about four hours of sleep. Maybe that's why, instead of rolling over and going back to sleep, I get up and dance around the room with her.

We're laughing at each other as we shimmy and shake our hips, but it doesn't even matter because we're alive...and because we got the dragon bone.

We got the dragon bone.

That means we've got all four things necessary to get Hudson out of my head. I mean, yeah, we still have the Unkillable Beast to get through, but we're almost there.

"Oh, I don't know," Hudson interjects from behind me, sitting up and leaning against the wall on my bed. "Because the Unkillable Beast is going to kill you perhaps?"

"Hush!" I tell him and sit down next to him, out of breath as the song ends. Macy plops down on her own bed as well. "Don't be raining on my parade this morning."

"Is that what I'm doing?" He looks somber, but there's an underlying note of something in his voice that has me narrowing my eyes.

"You're happy," I accuse.

"Excuse me?" Immediately, the tone is gone, replaced by his normal sardonic one.

"You are," I tell him as surprise courses through me. "You're actually happy for once."

Commented [ep1]: So Macy is playing loud music while Grace is trying to sleep? Totally not a nice thing to do. ☹️ Can we maybe have her dancing with headphone then switches to phone speaker and it's Shakira?

He sniffs, but doesn't say anything else, which means I'm right. The knowledge only makes me grin more widely. A happy Hudson can only be a good thing.

"Xavier held my hand last night," Macy says, and now she's smiling up at the ceiling she's been contemplating so hard for the last couple of minutes.

"What?" I shoot up in bed. "When?"

"When we were walking back from the ~~B~~boneyard."

"How did I miss that?" I demand. "I was right there, wasn't I?"

"You were ~~in one of the front~~first to go through the portal, with Flint and Jaxon. Xavier and I were walking together at the back and..." She pauses, a dreamy smile coming over her face. "About halfway back to school, he told me to watch out for something in the tunnels and tugged my hand to pull me away. And then he just never let go."

"Seriously? That's great. I mean, if you like him?"

"I do, actually." She rolls over on her bed and hugs her pillow to her chest. "He gives me butterflies. -Not like the oh my gosh, the most popular boy in school is in my room -butterflies, but real butterflies. Because of *who* he is, not because of what he is."

"Oh, Macy, that's awesome. That's how I feel about Jaxon, actually."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Like it doesn't matter that he's this badass vamp. It only matters that he's Jaxon."

"You certainly know how to kill a mood, don't you?" Hudson snarks from where he's sitting on top of my dresser. "I think I need a dose of insulin after all that sweetness."

"Bite me," I answer with a roll of my eyes in his direction, and Macy grins.

"If you keep saying that, one of these days I'm going to take you up on that offer," he tells me.

“I’ll worry about that after you actually get some teeth,” I shoot back.

“Wow. Looks like you don’t have that problem,” he tells me, all mock hurt. But there’s a glint of amusement in his eyes that he doesn’t even try to hide. “Maybe I’ll borrow some of yours. Sounds like you’ve got plenty of teeth to go around.”

“Yeah, I do.” I snap said teeth at him. “My gargoyle fangs may not be as badass as yours, but they get the job done. You should probably remember that.”

“I remember everything about you,” he tells me and there’s something in his voice, and his face, that has me turning toward him, wanting to ask...I don’t know what exactly. But definitely something.

“Okay,” Macy says with a groan that breaks the sudden tension between Hudson and me.

“Class starts in half an hour, so it’s definitely glamour time today.”

I smile at her, relaxed and happy for the first time in weeks. “You know, sometimes this whole gargoyle being immune to normal magic thing really sucks,” I tell her as I reach for a ponytail holder and twist my hair up into a not very impressive looking bun.

—— “Tell me about it,” she answers. “Guess it’s a good thing you’re cute.”

—— “Not that cute ——” I walk to the bathroom to splash water on my swollen eyes —— after four hours of sleep.

—— “Looks like being a total badass is going to have to make up for it,” she taunts as she grabs her toothbrush and puts toothpaste on it. “Think you can handle it?”

—— I look at my sad, sad, reflection in the mirror —— purple under eye circles, pale skin, sad hair. “Not today I don’t.”

—— “Go find Jaxon,” she suggests. “Let him put some color in those cheeks.”

—— “Maybe I will,” I answer right before sticking my tongue out at her.

~~—— She just gives me a thumbs up and continues brushing her teeth while I head over to my closet...and Hudson complains about feeling nauseous again.~~

~~—— And I can't help but laugh. A couple days ago it felt like nothing would ever be normal again and now, this morning feels about as normal as it gets... if normal includes having a maybe not so evil vampire in my head, bruises on my arms and a craving for cherry pop-tarts.~~

At least until Macy sticks her head around the wall that separates the sink from the rest of the room and says, "Don't forget we have that assembly today."

"What assembly?" I ask as I reach for my uniform skirt and a purple tank_top

"The one where we get the Bloodstone, silly." She ~~pe~~aks around the wall that separates the bathroom from the rest of the room. "The Vampire King wants to do it with all the pomp and circumstance."

And just like that, my good mood shatters. And so does Hudson's if the very British curses ~~echoing in my head~~he's tossing out are any indication...

Chapter 87

~~Several hours later, it's time for art class, and I can't help the bounce in my step. I've been itching to get back to the painting I'd already started. I have no idea where it's going yet, but it's calling to me.~~

~~Before I start, I do what I always do. I arrange my tools exactly how I like them, small, fine ones near the front, bigger ones near the back, all the colors of the rainbow right in front of me. And then I start to paint.~~

I still don't know what I'm painting—although, today I suddenly have a much clearer idea of it in my mind, but I don't know what it is or where I've seen it before. That doesn't matter, though, because the image is so real in my head that I don't need to know what it is. I can simply paint what I see.

And so I do, mixing color after color, shade after shade, until all the shades of blue and gray and black and white combine in the picture I'm painting. I layer the shades carefully, one tiny color distinction after another, until they form a picture so tightly painted that one shade is practically indistinguishable from another. Until trying to get through the painting means unraveling every single shade of every single color.

I work for hours, until my hands are sore and my shoulders and biceps are on fire. And still I keep going, still I keep painting, layer after layer after layer, until the picture in my head slowly comes to life on the canvas

Hudson wakes up from a nap in the middle of the painting, and I expect him to argue with me about the right shade of black again.

But he doesn't. Instead, he just watches me with unfathomable eyes...and an oddly soft look on his face.

When I'm finally done, when I'm finally convinced I've done the picture in my mind justice, I put the paintbrushes down. And nearly weep with the relief that comes from lowering my arms.

I close my eyes and stretch and when I finally open them, it's to find Hudson looking straight at me.

"Do you remember?" he asks in a whisper so tentative that I can't believe it even came from him.

"No. Why? Is this a place you know?" I ask quickly.

"I don't believe you. You couldn't have painted this if you don't remember."

"I don't remember," I tell him honestly. "I just know that when I sat down to paint, this place came to me. It felt right, like I had to paint it, so I did."

I don't say anything else and, for long seconds, neither does Hudson. Eventually, though, he inclines his head and says, "Thank you anyway."

_____ “Do you know where it is?” I ask in a voice even lower than his.

_____ “Yes,” he answers.

_____ “Are you going to tell me?”

_____ Another silence, this one even longer than the one that came before it. “It’s my lair.”

Chapter 87

“Don’t be nervous,” Jaxon tells me several hours later as I fiddle with my uniform tie for what feels like the hundredth time. But I can’t help it. My stomach’s been churning since Macy told me about the assembly this morning. Then doubled when Hudson told me I’d painted his lair from memory.

“Be very nervous,” Hudson tells me from his spot lounging against the door. “In fact, maybe you should just call in sick.”

Macy calls out from the bathroom, “Hey Jaxon, can you help me? I can’t get the damn lid off this new jar of lotion.”

Jaxon smiles at me, then gets up to help Macy. Jaxon’s phone rings—his mom is calling—
and he walks into his bedroom to answer it.

“I think you’re the one who’s nervous,” I answer as soon as Jaxon is out of earshot.

“Umm, yeah. Because, you know, at least two people in that room want to kill you. Probably more.” Hudson pauses for a second and thinks. “Yeah, definitely more.”

“Well, then, it’s sad for them, isn’t it, that I have no intention of dying today. Or anytime soon.”

“Yeah, we’ll see,” he mutters.

“You need to be a little more positive, you know that?” I’m so annoyed that I say ~~it out~~ loud louder than I intended as Jaxon strides back out of the bathroom over to me.

“What did I do?” Jaxon asks, looking very confused.

“That wasn’t to you,” I explain. “That was to your brother.”

“Oh.” Jaxon rears back, like he’d forgotten Hudson exists. -Or like he can’t believe I might be talking to the both of them at the same time. Like I haven’t done that every day since I made it back to my human form or something?

“What’s he saying?”

“That it’s a bad idea to go to this assembly. But he said it about the last one, too, so I don’t have a lot of faith in his opinion. Besides, how else are we going to get the Bloodstone?

“There are eight of you,” Hudson tells me testily. “You could let any one of the other seven pick it up.”

“And let Cyrus know I’m afraid of him?” I ~~answer~~glare at Hudson~~shake my head at Hudson~~. “I don’t think so.”

“You should be afraid of him. And even if you’re not, you should act like you are. Anything else will just piss him off.”

“Apparently everything is going to piss him off.” I ~~snap~~put both my hands on my hips. “So why does it matter what I do?”

Commented [ep2]: Just trying to show more movement so Jaxon really sees she’s getting into her conversation with his brother.

“You’re right, it probably doesn’t. Which is another reason why you shouldn’t go!” Hudson practically growls with aggravation.

“Why don’t you go visit someone else for a while? Bring your doom and gloom there?” I make an obnoxious face. “Oh wait, you can’t. That’s why we need to get the stone.”

He arches a brow. “You know that joke was old the first time you told it, right?”

“Yeah, well you—”

“Not to interrupt what I’m sure is a scintillating conversation,” Jaxon says so coolly that I feel the chill in my bones, “But I thought maybe you might like to talk to me instead of my brother. I mean, since ~~you’re I’m actually here. In my your room~~you’re actually in my room.”

Of course. Because what I need ~~today is for both~~right now of the Vega brothers to freak out on me, even if it is for different reasons, is for Jaxon to decide to freak out about my relationship with Hudson. And by relationship, I mean the hostage situation I'm currently embroiled in.

Commented [TD3]: This doesn't play right after the scene in the boneyard last night. The emotional beats are off

~~"That one's getting old, too~~Yeah, well, I wouldn't have to freak out if you would take your own safety a little more seriously," Hudson ~~says with another yawn~~tells me. "You really should start looking for some new material. I can't help you if you won't help yourself."

~~"And you should probably get the hell out of my head~~I didn't ask you to help me!" I ~~practically screech~~answer in my head so Jaxon doesn't get upset.

"Maybe you should," he shoots back.

"Seriously?" Jaxon says. "You can't stop talking to him for two seconds? I'm trying to have a conversation with you here."

"Of course I can. I'm sorry." I take a deep breath, blow it out slowly. "What do you want to talk about, Jaxon?"

"Has he always been this whiny?" Hudson demands. "Honestly, I don't know how you stand it."

"Stop," I tell him and intentionally give him my back, determined not to engage with him any more right now.

~~"Shut up," I grind out from between my teeth.~~

But he's not having it. He walks around Jaxon so I'm facing both brothers now. "I'm only trying to be helpful, Grace. I know better than most just how spoiled Jaxon can be."

~~"He's not spoiled,"~~ I jump in to defend Jaxon instantly and then realize, almost as quickly, that I've just been totally played. ~~"You're kind of a jackass. You know that, right?"~~

Commented [ep4]: I don't get this joke.

“Know it?” He looks down his nose at me in a kind of snooty, kind of playful manner. “I pride myself on it.”

“Yeah, but—”

“So,” Jaxon looks really nervous. “What do you think?”

“About what?” I ask before I can think better of it.

“You weren’t listening ~~at all~~?” He looks vaguely homicidal. “You didn’t hear anything I said?”

“I did. I just—”

He sighs disgustedly. “What I said, was that there’s another way to get Hudson out of your head. Besides the spell with the five artifacts.”

“Seriously? And you’re just bringing this up now?” I grab onto his hand. “What is it?”

“It’s fairly drastic—”

“Yeah, because going up against something called the Unkillable Beast isn’t drastic at all,” I answer, totally deadpan. “Why didn’t you tell me earlier? I mean, we already have all four of the necessary—”

“Five,” Jaxon growls. “We need five items. There’s no way we’re bringing him back if he’s not human. No way.”

I think back to what the Bloodletter said, to what everyone has said about Hudson—except Hudson. Every time I start to think that maybe he’s not so bad, I force myself to remember what it felt like to be standing in that assembly with him and being unable to move. “Okay, okay. I know you’re right about the whole power thing. So what is this other way?”

Jaxon looks a little sick, and this time he’s the one taking the deep breath. Which makes my stomach plummet.

“What is it?” I ask, suddenly a lot more frightened than I was just a minute ago.

“We could break the mating bond.”

The words fall like a nuclear bomb between us, the shock and pain of them radiating through me in a way nothing ever has in my whole life—even my parents’ deaths.

“I don’t—I can’t—”

“Holy shit. Exactly how much does my brother hate me?” Hudson ~~exclaims~~~~whispers~~.

I take a moment to answer Hudson and-...you know, also try to figure out how to breathe. *“Seriously? That’s what you’re asking now? I would assume a lot, since he—you know—killed you.”*

“Killing is pretty normal in our world. ~~Trying to break a mating bond? That’s unheard of.~~ Mainly because it’s literally impossible. Trust me, if it were possible, my mom would have definitely divorced *her* jackass mate.” Hudson starts to pace. “This must be some scary as shit magic if it can sever a mating bond.”

Wow. Okay then.

I press a hand to my stomach, still trying to absorb the blow of Jaxon’s words. And worse, the fact that he brought this up at all.

“So...” I have a million things I want to ask, but no idea how to ask them. So I start with the most basic. “You don’t want to be mated to me anymore?”

“Of course I want to be mated to you!” he exclaims, and this time he’s the one who grabs my hands. “I want it more than anything.”

“Then why would you even suggest...” There’s a strange ringing in my ears, and I shake my head to clear it. “I thought mating bonds were unbreakable.”

“I thought so, too. But I asked the Bloodletter—”

Commented [TD5]: Jaxon does this in front of MACY??????????? I have a hard time imagining that, so I switched it back but still got him out of earshot

Commented [ep6R6]: YOU are the one who had Macy in the room, not me. Lol I’m super find with her gone. 😊

Commented [ep7]: I think we need to change this up a bit so there are no questions for why the queen didn’t sever her bond to the king.

“You asked her? When we were there?” The pain deep inside me gets worse and worse.

“When? When she put me to sleep? When she was putting me in thate cage?” ~~How could you do that?”~~

“No, not then. Of course not.” He gives me a pleading look. “It was way before.”

Somehow that sounds even worse. “How ‘way before’, considering I was here for a week, then gone for nearly four months, then hereaf for a few days...? When exactly did you ask her? And why?”

“I asked her after you first got here, and I realized we were mated. I’d nearly killed you with the window... It just seemed like a really bad idea to be mated to a human that I could probably get killed. So I went to her and asked for a spell to break the bond.”

There’s so much to unpack there that I don’t even know where to start. And for once, Hudson is completely silent, absolutely no help at all. The traitor.

I still can’t believe he Jaxon didn’t tell me we were mated. I mean, I get why he didn’t say anything that first day, but why not after the snowball fight or when we started dating?

But I also can’t believe he was going to break the bond—without even asking me. He was going to do something so irrevocable, so painful, so terrible, and he wasn’t even going to get my opinion on the matter. It would have affected me too, I’m sure of it, and he wasn’t even going to ask?

And now, after we’ve come so far, he brings up breaking the bond again because having Hudson in my head is an inconvenience to him? Even though we’re so close to getting him out another way? A way that leaves the bond completely intact?

“Did she give you the spell?” I finally whisper, because there’s so much to say, I don’t know where to start.

“She did,” ~~he~~ tells me.

~~Wow. My breath catches.~~ “Seriously?” It feels like he just hit me again. “And you took it?”

“I was scared. I’d nearly killed you. I didn’t want to hurt you, Grace.”

“Yeah, because this is a picnic.” I look wildly around his room. “Where is it? Where are you keeping it?”

I don’t know why it matters, but it does. If he knows where it is, if it’s right at his ~~freaking-damn~~ fingertips...

“I threw it away.”

“What?” That’s not the answer I was expecting.

“I threw it away the same day she gave it to me. I couldn’t bring myself to do it, Grace. To either of us. Not before we’d even had a chance to try. ~~Not without your permission.~~”

I blow out a breath slowly, as the pain finally ebbs. It doesn’t go away completely, but it ~~slowly~~ dissipates ~~a lot~~. Because he couldn’t do it. He couldn’t break what was between us before it even got started, ~~and especially without telling me~~. That makes a difference. If he could, if he’d kept it... I don’t know if I’d ever be able to get past it.

“We’re not breaking the mating bond, Jaxon.”

“It could starve him. Without the energy from the bond to feed on, he would die ~~quickly, right?~~ ~~I think you’d be okay in that scenario. It’s the draining that is slowly killing us all.~~”

His words poke at all my still-tender spots. “And I’d have to sit by and watch him die. ~~?~~ While also being traumatized at the loss of my mate. ~~?~~”

“You wouldn’t lose me. I’d still be here—”

“Just not my mate anymore.” I look at him with what I know is my heart in my eyes. “Is that really what you want?” I whisper.

“Of course it’s not what I want!” he practically shouts.

“Good. Then don’t bring it up again.”

“Grace—”

“No.” I want to throw myself against at him, wrap my arms around his waist, but I’m still aching. “I mean it, Jaxon. If you want things to stay the same between us, you can’t ever bring this up again.”

“I’m sorry.” He wraps his arms around me, holds me as tightly as I’m holding him. “I was only trying to make things better for you.”

“I don’t need that kind of help,” I answer, even as I wonder if that’s really true. If making things better for me is the only reason he brought this up.

“I’m sorry,” he says again. “I’m so sorry.”

I don’t know if it’s enough. Honestly, I don’t know what would be enough right now, but it’s a start. That has to count for something.

“Okay,” I tell him, even though I’m feeling anything but. Still, we’re out of time. We have to get to the assembly.

Maybe if I just breathe for a little while, the pain will go away. And so will the sense of betrayal that’s rocketingricocheting through me.

As I head for the door, I dread having to field Hudson’s snark in the middle of all of this. But for once, he

and then I tilt my head up for a kiss and for once, Hudson doesn’t make a sound.

Commented [ep8]: This isn’t right. Should be acknowledging to herself she feels anything but okay.

Chapter 8689

I'm still reeling ten minutes later as we make our way to the ceremony. I tell myself that it's no big deal, that everything is going to be okay—with Jaxon, with the ceremony, with the Unkillable Beast. But how okay can I convince myself things are going to be, when Jaxon was willing to sever our mating bond?

Everything feels wrong now, off kilter. And the fact that Hudson is back to haranguing me definitely doesn't help.

“Which part of *my father murdered every gargoyle in existence* do you not understand?” Hudson demands, as we make our way down to the auditorium. “Do you think he killed all of them in secret? He did it right out in the open and dared anyone to question him. And if they did, he killed them, too—or at least discredited them. You think he can't make one silly little girl go away?”

“His words, not mine,” he hastens to add when I turn on him, infuriated. “I'm just saying, that's what he'll be thinking. It's not true, but that's how he'll see it.”

“Yeah, well that's ridiculous,” I mutter and glance up at Jaxon talking to Mehki.

“Absolutely. But he's a ridiculous man. Evil. Monstrous. But ridiculous. You'll do well to remember that.”

He doesn't say anything else, but then neither do Jaxon, Mehki, or I as we take the last flight of stairs two at a time. The others are waiting for us at the bottom, looking a million times happier than I feel. Then again, the King probably doesn't want to kill *them*.

“Looking good, Grace,” Flint tells me, holding up a hand for a fist bump.

“You’re looking pretty good yourself,” I tell him, because it’s true. All the guys look amazing in their dress uniform, especially since they get to wear blazers tonight instead of those absurd purple robes.

~~I still feel awkward around him now that I know how he feels about Jaxon, but I tell myself I’m just going to have to get over that. Flint is my friend, and I’m not going to walk away from that just because things are weird right now.~~

“Everybody ready for this dog and vampire show?” Mekhi asks as he holds an arm out for Eden. She looks a little surprised at the gesture—I’m guessing the combat boots and kickass attitude tend to limit the gallant gestures aimed her way—but then she smiles wider than I’ve ever seen her.

“Damn straight!” she tells him, taking his offered arm.

Xavier offers his arm to Macy, and she giggles like crazy before she also takes it. But I can’t help grinning at the way she and Xavier keep stealing glances at each other out of the corners of their eyes when they think the other one isn’t looking.

“Guess that leaves you and me,” Flint says to Gwen with a waggle of his eyebrows.

She looks at him like he’s a little strange, but she nods as she gingerly takes his arm.

Jaxon reaches up and smooths my curls out of my face. “It’s going to be okay,” he tells me. “I promise, I won’t let anything happen to you.”

“I know you won’t,” I answer as he takes my hand in his. But his words from earlier keep playing in my head. ~~His suggestion that we sever the mating bond is one of the most painful conversations I’ve ever lived through, way more painful than anything Cyrus has done to me so far.~~

Sometimes it feels like Jaxon tries to protect me from everyone but himself.

But as our palms meet, I can't help but realize how drained he is. I fed him energy down the mating bond right after we got back from the Boneyard earlier, and he seemed to be doing better, but right now I'm not so sure.

Commented [TD9]: Are we cutting these 2 paragraphs or leaving them in?

Commented [ep10R10]: Leaving them in. He's still being drained, just not intentionally.

~~It worries me. Not because I don't think he can't protect me—I can protect myself—but because I don't like the tiredness I can feel coming down the mating bond from him. Hudson and I have only been back for a week and a half and he's already this drained. What happens in a few more weeks, or months?~~ We have to get the last item. We don't have any time at all to waste.

"So anxious to get me out, huh?" Hudson asks.

~~"So anxious to get your brother back to normal,"~~ I answer. ~~"It's not the same thing."~~

I wait for the obnoxious comeback, and it doesn't take long. ~~"Jaxon doesn't do normal, or haven't you noticed?"~~

~~"Says the guy who lives in my head,"~~ I shoot back, fed up with everyone at the moment.

~~"Hate to be the one to break it to you, but he's not the abnormal one here."~~

Hudson starts to say something else, but he stops as we walk into the auditorium, which is already half filled with students, many of whom turn to look at us as we start toward the front of the auditorium.

There's a purple carpet—a *purple carpet!*—lining the walkway up to the stage. It's obviously for us, and I feel completely ridiculous walking down it, even though everyone else seems to think it's totally normal.

Uncle Finn is waiting when we get to the stage, once again fiddling with the sound system. He grins at all of us, and goes out of his way to send a little encouraging wink to Macy and me.

Still, there's something in his eyes—they're so serious, despite his smile and wink—that makes my stomach clench.

"Is it too late to run?" I ask, and I'm only half-kidding. Something about this just feels off. Jaxon squeezes my hand.

"I told you not to come," Hudson hisses at me. "I told you something bad would happen."

~~"Nothing bad has happened yet,"~~ I try to soothe, but my heart has started beating out of control.

~~"Give it time," he answers ominously.~~

Even Jaxon looks like he thinks running might be an option, especially as the assembly hall doors start to swing closed and the members of the Circle come parading up the walkway on the opposite side of the auditorium from where the rest of us entered.

Cyrus walks to the podium with all the pomp and flair of Mick Jagger at a Stones concert. Today he's dressed in a black pinstripe suit with a purple and black tie and—not going to lie—he looks like a million bucks. Of course, his eyes are gleaming like a zealot's, so it takes a little ~~bit~~ away from the whole picture.

As soon as the other members of the Circle find their seats, he starts the assembly with a "Thank you, Katmere Academy, for the most exciting Ludaes tournament we have ever experienced. It was truly a delight to preside over such an incredible event."

The room falls silent as he looks the audience over, and I'm not sure what's scarier, the serious looks on their faces or the sound of the locks as the doors slide shut.

I swallow the panic rising in my throat as I give the audience a shaky smile. What I don't know if Hudson knows either, but all of a sudden, he's shouting, "Run, Grace," in my head.

~~I can't run! I tell him. The doors are locked. Plus, we need that bloodstone.~~

~~“Fuck the bloodstone! Get the hell out of here. Now!”~~

~~Where am I going to go that he won't find me? It's not like I can just leave Katmere Academy. If you're worried now, what do you think will happen if he catches me alone later~~

~~Hudson doesn't have an answer for that, because the answer is too horrible to contemplate, and we both know it. So instead of racing~~ I really want to do is race down the aisle like I desperately, desperately want to like a K-pop fan after my favorite idol, but instead I stay where I am as the King turns back to the audience and continues what I now know—what all eight of us now know—is a total fucking farce.

“First on the agenda, is celebrating the win of this amazing team up here. They played an incredible game of Ludares, didn't they? That moment when Grace dodged the two dragons was breathtaking. And when she turned one of the dragons to stone?” He shakes his head.

“Absolutely captivating.

The audience claps more enthusiastically than I expected.

“So, with no further ado, let's bring them up to accept the special prize donated this year—a bloodstone from the royal collection.”

Delilah ~~joins heris also -husband~~ at the front of the stage, ~~though it's clear she plans to let her husband do all the talking today~~. She's dressed ~~all-head to toe~~ in white, and she looks as terrifying as she does chillingly beautiful. ~~Her crimson lips are turned upward in a perfect smile—that looks about as genuine as a snake's.~~

~~“I'm so honored to be here with these incredible champions tonight,” she says, her crimson lips turned upward in the perfect smile. “They performed amazing feats on the field yesterday, and I can only imagine what amazing feats are in store for us as they graduate from Katmere and more fully join our world. The Cirele wishes them the best, as we wish all of you~~

Commented [ep11]: Feel free to reword. Want to say she seems happy to the casual observer but her smile is actually cold as fuck.

the best. We'd like to thank each and every one of you for your lovely hospitality during our visit."

The audience is leaning forward in their seats again, and they clap a lot more enthusiastically than they did for Cyrus. Cyrus motions towards our team at the back of the auditorium. "With no further ado, can our Ludares winners please come forward together and take a bow?"

The group of us exchange uneasy glances—~~none of us wants to go to the front of the stage right now. And definitely none of us wants to get any closer to the members of the Circle than we absolutely have to.~~ but Jaxon squares his shoulders and walks in front, with all of us following behind

~~But the look on Cyrus's face is very clear. We will get up and we will come to them or we will pay the price. I don't know what the price is, but judging from the way even Xavier and Flint fall into line, it can't be good.~~

~~———We all walk up together,~~ reluctantly and single file.

"Take your bow," Cyrus instructs, and ~~we do, though I'm pretty sure every single one of us is keeping a wary eye on him~~ we do as the audience applauds.

Cyrus walks behind us now and pats everyone on the back as he calls their name. I'm at the end, though, and he stops when he gets to me.

"Grace." Cyrus looks me up and down as I come to a stop in front of him, and it totally squicks me out. Not because the look he gives me is lascivious—it's not—but because it's avaricious. Like he wants me, but only because he's already figured out how to best use me to serve his interests.

"It's so lovely to meet you," he tells me, -coming around to the side of me and opening both arms in some kind of bizarre facsimile of a social distancing hug. "My son's mate, a gargoyle." He shakes his head. "It's unfathomable, but so, so exciting."

"So exciting," Delilah echoes, and her perfect crimson smile never wavers.

Cyrus continues, "I can't tell you how impressed we were by your performance during the tournament."

"My entire team did very well," I agree.

She-Delilah cocks a brow, in exactly the same way both of her sons do but says nothing.
~~"So they did. But you were the secret weapon, the question we were all searching for an answer to. And you gave it to us, my precious, precious girl."~~

~~—"And by precious girl she means powerful creature that my husband must kill to make himself feel manly again in the face of your power," Hudson whispers to me.~~

~~—"Yeah," I answer. "I got that."~~

"So they did. But you were their secret weapon. We all saw Grace Foster's performance at the Ludares tournament yesterday, correct?" Cyrus's voice booms through the auditorium and elicits cheers in response. "We saw the amazing things she could do, didn't we?" More cheers.

"But we also saw how vulnerable the poor girl is," Delilah-Cyrus ehimes in adds, shaking his head. "We saw her struggle, we saw her dragged across the field by a werewolf, we saw her nearly die between two dragons. Grace, our only gargoyle in over one thousand years."

~~"And that's not all," she continues. "Think about what happened here just a few short months ago, when Grace was beaten and violated and nearly bled dry—"~~

~~"Where's she going with this?"~~ I ask Hudson as ~~s~~he continues to list the many things that have happened to me since my parents died.

Commented [ep12]: I think we need to cut this. In the opening chpaters, you established that no one knows what happened in the tunnels, remember?

“Nowhere good.”

Cyrus pauses and it's like the who room forgot to breathe. He turns to his wife and motions her over. “Would you like to deliver the good news, Delilah?” ~~“And in other news, we're screwed. You're the master of the obvious, you know that?”~~

———“Hey, I'm just calling them like I see them.”

~~“This is why,”~~ The queen's smile becomes almost brittle, as though holding it one second longer might shatter her entire façade. But she walks forward and takes the microphone from Cyrus, turns to the audience and says ~~Delilah says as she finally gets to the point,~~ “It is with utmost pleasure that I share some exciting news.”

She turns to me and I don't know which of us is more anxious about what she's about to say. Probably me. As her smile grows wider, my heartbeat pounds in my ears so loud I'm not sure I'll be able to hear what she has to say next.

~~“The Circle has voted and agreed. King Cyrus and I have decided to will be taking take Grace back-home with us to the Vampire Court, where she can be safe.”~~

Nope. I definitely heard that.

Commented [ep13]: Reword as I don't think I got this right, but what we want to show is that the queen and the king have undercurrents, introduce doubt that the queen actually is in agreement. She's playing a role right now, but not one she wants.

We need to do this bc they actually are not on the same side. We need to start seeding this in now for book three. I think it also adds more intrigue.

Commented [ep14]: Need end of scene hook but not sure Nope is her voice. Is it?

Chapter 90

“Fuck, no!” Everything within Hudson instantly repudiates his mother’s words. Then again, everything inside me does the same thing.

“Don’t worry, Grace. I won’t let that happen.” Jaxon whispers ~~’s as his~~ hand tightens on mine, but I only vaguely register his words. ~~“I won’t let that happen.”~~

I think I’m in shock. My palms are sweaty, but I can’t hear my heartbeat anymore. It’s pounding so fast, it’s just one continuous hum in my head.

“It was a grave and difficult decision,” Cyrus takes the microphone back and add~~schimes~~ ~~in~~. “But in a four-four~~f~~ decision—with me casting the tie-breaking vote—~~the~~ the Circle has voted that we must take Grace back home to London with us, where we can train her to ~~protect~~defend herself, and protect her ourselves until she can.”

The audience of students begins to clap at his words, though not as enthusiastically as before, so-but he doesn’t seem to notice, or care. ~~continues, making certain, I’m sure, that his speech—and false motives—are recorded for posterity.~~ “I know you all care for Grace as we do, and I am so glad you agree that this rare creature, this new hope for our battered world, must be protected-guarded at all costs.”

“You can’t do that!” Jaxon growls at his father

~~“Don’t make me do the same to you, boy,”~~ Cyrus turns from the mic and tells his son in a low, contemptuous voice, ~~“~~ Stay quiet, boy. You won’t like what lies down that road if you~~I~~ don’t.”

“I don’t care—” Jaxon starts, but he breaks off when I squeeze his hand hard enough to almost break it. ~~But Because~~ Hudson is yammering in my head, screaming at me to stop Jaxon, that he has another plan.

Cyrus takes Jaxon’s pause as acceptance and turns back to his audience and continues his speech, but I’m not paying attention to what he says.

“Wait,” I whisper to my mate. “Just give Hudson a second to talk to me.”

“Hudson?” Jaxon asks, his face twisted in disbelief. “You’re going to believe *him*? My parents’ perfect little minion?”

“It’s not like that,” I tell him, but when he wants to argue, I hold up a surreptitious hand to stop him.

“Challenge for inclusion,” Hudson tells me. “Do it loud and make sure it’s on the record.”

“Inclusion? What’s that?”

“Just do it, before they close the assembly. You don’t have much time.”

“Wait,” I shout, and Cyrus turns

—— Cyrus is reaching for the microphone, a furious set to his normally placid face, and I know that Hudson is right at being openly challenged.”

I take a deep breath. Am I really going to trust Hudson?

“Do you have a choice?” he huffs.

“I challenge for Inclusion,” I don’t. So I shout out as loudly and as clearly as I can, “I challenge for Inclusion.”

And the room goes eerily quiet. Oh fuck. What have I done?

“The only thing you could,” Hudson replies, but he’s not looking at me. He’s looking directly at his father, a sly smile curving his lips.

Commented [ep15]: I dunno. Feel like this might help with tension with Hudson a bit, yes?

Chapter 88 COUNCIL SCENE

“Inclusion?” Cyrus hisses ~~as he turns back to meet me~~ with murder in his eyes.

His reaction only spurs me on “Yes,” I say again. “I challenge for inclusion.”

“On what grounds?” he demands as the other members of the Circle start to -exchange looks.

“Yeah, Hudson, on what grounds?”

“On the grounds that gargoyles ~~have a rightful seat on~~ ~~were members of~~ the Circle ~~and held one~~ all the way up until their extermination. But don’t use that word because it will just set my father off more.”

“What!? That’s what Inclusion is? I’m calling for a seat on the Circle? ~~No way I don’t want that!~~”

“It’s that or live in my parents’ dungeon forever. I’ve spent a lot of time down there myself, and I have to say, it’s not a place you want to call home.”

“On what grounds?” Cyrus thunders again, and when I don’t immediately answer, he gives a twisted little smirk and turns back around to face the audience. “Inclusion den—”

“Gargoyles ~~used to be members of the~~ ~~are an equal ruling faction on the~~ Circle, ~~by law,~~” I tell him. “~~Until they died.~~ Now that a gargoyle exists again, ~~we-I~~ have the right to representation ~~in the Circle.~~ ~~And since I am the only gargoyle in existence,~~ ~~So~~ I challenge for Inclusion.”

The other Circle members -exchange another look and some of them—like Flint’s parents—are nodding. Even Delilah looks a little pained.

“Do you even know what the Challenge is?” he demands.

“It’s a...”

~~“Test Trial,”~~ Hudson ~~hisses~~supplies.

~~“Trialet,”~~ I call out. “It’s a test I have to pass.” Oh shit, I realize. This is what everyone had told me about. The reason Ludaes came about to begin with.

~~“What have you gotten me into?”~~ I demand of Hudson.

“It’s a ~~test trial~~ no one ever takes alone. ~~It’s a test, one~~ that only mated pairs can take,” Cyrus tells me. “Therefore—”

~~“I’m her mate~~Good thing she has a mate,” Jaxon says, stepping forward. “And we challenge for ~~I~~inclusion. Together.”

Cyrus looks like he’s going to explode and kill us both on the stage, consequences be damned, but then Imogen—one of the witches on the Circle—stands up. “They should have the right to challenge,” she says.

Her mate stands with her. “I agree.”

“So do we,” Nuri ~~and her partner~~ stands as well.

~~“It won’t be enough,”~~ I tell Hudson. ~~“There won’t be enough votes without the wolves.”~~

~~“I need you to let me use you~~You have a right to a seat by law,” Hudson tells me. ~~“It isn’t up for a vote.”~~

~~“Use me how?~~By law, a gargoyle has a right to a seat on the Circle. This isn’t up for debate. Or vote.” I ~~demand~~hold Cyrus’s gaze and can tell he’s debating his next move carefully.

~~—— I can influence one of the wolves. I can get them to support the challenge.”~~

~~—— “I don’t—I can’t——”~~

~~—— “Okay,”~~ he says, a haunted look in his eyes that tells me he’s remembering the fight we had the last time we were in this room. ~~“It’s up to you. I won’t do it without your permission.”~~

———“Delilah and I are against the challenge,” Cyrus turns to Imogen. “. And you, wolves? Do you vote to accept the Inclusion Challenge?”

Imogen shakes her head as she moves to stand. And that’s when I know for sure, that there really is only one way out of this for me.

“Do it,” I tell Hudson.

———“What?”

———“I said, do it. Do whatever you have to do to sway the audience.”

———He doesn’t waste time asking me if I’m sure. Instead, I suddenly feel him in my mind in a way I haven’t before, his fingerprints all over my brain. I don’t know what he’s doing, can’t hear what he’s saying or see what actions he’s taking, but I know he’s there and I know he’s doing something.

———It’s one of the most uncomfortable experiences of my life.

———Not as uncomfortable as spending the rest of my short life chained up in a dungeon, I remind myself. And then I just close my eyes and let Hudson do whatever it is he needs to do to save me.———Imogen’s mate stands with her, and as one, they say, “We do.”———Cyrus looks astounded. “What did you say?” he dmeands.

———“We support the challenge.”

———

———Cyrus looks like he’s about to explode—or at least murder a werewolf or two—but he’s trapped and he knows it.

“Fine,” Cyrus says, the word crackling with rage and indignation. “Your challenge stands. The Test-Trial will take place three days from now at dawn in the arena.”

“Tell him you need more time,” Hudson says urgently. “No way can you be ready in ~~three-two~~ days—”

“I need more time!” I say.

Cyrus shoots me a malicious look and says, “There is no more time. The Circle can-not afford to linger here as long as your heart desires. It is either ~~three-two~~ days from now or not at all. You choose.”

“I guess I’ll see you in the Arena then,” I tell him.

He nods, his face once again, carefully blank. “As you will, so mote it be.”

Commented [ep16]: Why would he use a witch phrase here? This feels very odd.

As we leave the stage, students are clapping and congratulating me as we pass down the aisle.

Commented [ep17]: Need a better description to capture the crazy mood, so the next three sentences hit in their simplicity.

“Well, that went better than expected,” Hudson comments.

“We’re fucked, aren’t we?” I ask.

Both Hudson and Jaxon reply at the same time, “Definitely.”

CHAPTER ~~89~~1

“What did I just do?” I demand as soon as we leave the ceremony and make ~~it~~our way up to Jaxon’s tower. Panic is a living, breathing beast within me, making my hands shake and my brain feel like it’s about to explode. “What did I just do?”

“It’s fine,” Hudson says quickly. “You’re fine.”

“You agreed to ~~take the test~~compete in the Trials,” Jaxon tells me. “Everyone who gets on the Circle has to ~~pass it~~compete—and win. But usually they do it~~That’s why it’s always done~~ as a mated pair, because it’s ~~hard~~dangerous.” He pauses. “It’s really ~~hard~~dangerous, Grace. ~~And usually deadly. No one has won a seat in a thousand years. Don’t you think people have tried to remove Cyrus before?~~”

“Of course it ~~is~~dangerous,” I answer. “I mean, what exactly about your world ~~isn’t hard~~deadly?”

“It’s your world, too,” Hudson reminds me, and for once he doesn’t sound cavalier. In fact, he sounds concerned, and not in a snide way.

Which, now that I think about it, might be what’s freaking me out so much. Well, ~~that~~ and ~~the~~ ~~fact~~ that I just agreed to participate in some twisted vampire version of reality TV—sudden death edition.

“And I say you might as well be in charge of it instead of crushed by it,” ~~he~~he adds.

“You shut up!” I tell him, and I’m so annoyed that I end up practically yelling it. Out loud.

“You’re the one who got me into this mess!”

“Me?” Jaxon looks insulted. “I’m just trying to help get you *out* of this mess.”

I don’t bother telling him I’m talking to Hudson. Not when I’ve got enough mad to go around.

“By signing up to die with me? I’m glad that feels like helping.”

Now he just looks pissed off. “Should I have ~~just~~ left you to go it alone when I can help you? We are mates, you know. That’s not just in name only.”

“Unless you decide otherwise,” I snark, and I know it’s a low blow, but I’m still hurting big time from what happened before. Then to add this whole ~~test-Trial~~ thing on top of it, followed by the fact that the only help with it can come from my mate? The guy who just told me that, for a while at least, he didn’t want to ~~even~~ be my mate?

It’s like rubbing salt in an open wound—~~ff~~followed by a lemon juice and vinegar chaser.

“Okay, look,” Macy steps in. “This is bad. No doubt about it. But we have too much to do in the next ~~three-two~~ days to start sniping at each other. So, can we just settle down and make a plan?”

“I’m pretty sure Cyrus already made a plan,” I ~~tell-hers~~ sigh and run a hand through my hair. “And it ends with me in chains or dead.”

“Yeah, well, that’s not going to happen,” Xavier tells me, hands on hips like he’s ready to battle now. “Not if we have anything to say about it.”

~~“Which they won’t,” Hudson comments. “My father doesn’t believe in democraecies.”~~

~~“Your father doesn’t believe in anything but himself and his own power,” I shoot back.~~

~~“Now there’s an understatement if I’ve ever heard one.” Hudson sighs and shoves a hand through his hair before leaning against one of Jaxon’s bookshelves. “The question is what are you going to do about it?”~~

~~Besides suck my thumb like a little kid? I have no idea. I mean, I know Hudson’s looking for me to say something deep and profound and inspirational, but he’s come to the wrong place. Because the truth is, I don’t know what I’m going to do about any of this and I could really use a little help figuring it out right about now.~~

~~But since no one seems to have any idea what to say or do right now, I finally decide to start things off.~~ “Can someone tell me exactly what this ~~test-Trial~~ is that I’ve just signed myself up for? I know it’s based on Ludares was based on it, but what exactly does that mean?”

~~“It’s a harder—much harder—version of Ludares. In fact, that’s how the game came to be played originally—as a training exercise for people trying to prepare for their Circle test.~~ It’s basically Ludares without rules. Or safety bracelets. No holds barred, free for all til the death.” Jaxon tells me. ~~“It became~~

Commented [ep18]: I don’t like this. Why would she infantilize herself. Maybe something more humorous like rock in a corner for a few hours til I stop wanting to puke? That’s relatable to adults too. ;)

~~popular outside of politics and now we all play it. But that doesn't mean it's roots aren't real~~And instead of eight versus eight teams, it's the two challengers against eight champions picked by the Circle."

"So, ~~I'm actually playing~~ Ludares on steroids?" I ask as a whole new brand of horror sweeps through me. "And I'm supposed to pla~~By~~ by myself?"

"With your mate," Jaxon reminds me. "I've got your back, Grace."

I sigh, because mad at him as I am—and I am really, really mad—I know that's true. Jaxon would never leave me hanging when I need him. Especially not when there's a way for him to help me. It's as I remember that ~~that~~ the last of my anger leaves me. Because Jaxon has always tried to do what is right for me—no matter how misguided—and that outweighs everything else.

~~—— If he'd actually cut the mating bond, things would be different. But he didn't, so I'm willing to let him slide, just this once.~~

"So," I say when I can finally think through the panic. "We have ~~three-two~~ days to get Jaxon and me in shape for the Trial~~Ludares test~~. Fantastic." "Any ideas?"

It's a sarcastic question, but judging from the contemplative looks on everyone's faces, they're actually trying to answer it. So many reasons why I adore my friends.

"Actually Well, I think we should talk about the fact that we have to get Hudson out of your head before you get on that ~~Ludares~~-field," Flint says. "Otherwise he's going to keep draining you and Jaxon, and then you'll both lose—and possibly even die."

"He's right," Macy agrees. "We've got to get him out as soon as possible."

"Which means getting to the Unkillable ~~B~~beast as soon as possible," Jaxon says. "We can't let him out until we have the ~~beast's heart~~stoneheart the beast is guarding."

"What is it with my brother's determination to die?" Hudson grumbles. "You don't need ~~the a~~ stone-heart. You just need to get me out, so I don't put any more strain on the mating bond. And you already have everything you need to do that."

"Yeah, well, you don't get a vote," I tell him as Jaxon and Flint start arguing over the best way to go about killing the beast.

“Of course I don’t. Why should I, when I’m the one most affected by it? ~~And the one who knows most about this whole thing?~~” He rolls his eyes ~~right back.~~

Ugh. I’m frustrated and freaked out, and the last thing I need is Hudson’s martyr complex right now.

“Martyr complex?” he almost roars. “Are you kidding me? I’m the *only* reason you’re not in chains bound for my parents’ dungeon, and I have a martyr complex? Seriously?”

I sigh. “You weren’t supposed to hear that.”

“News flash. I’m in your head,” he snaps and paces in front of Jaxon’s bookcase. “I hear everything. Every snarky little thought you have, I know about it. Every fear, I see it. Every random thought is front and center in my brain, so I get that you’re afraid. And I get that you don’t want to trust me because of what everyone else has told you.

“But ~~you can see in my head, too, anytime you want. You just have to look ... and to believe what you find.~~ So could you please, for one minute, just listen to me? Just think this through. I swear, I’m trying to help you. I swear, that’s all I’m trying to do, Grace. It’s all I’ve done since I’ve come back, is try to help you.”

I want to believe him, I do. So much so that it surprises me. But I’m scared. I’ve made mistakes before, trusted people I shouldn’t. Look at what happened with Lia.

“I’m not Lia,” he tells me. “I never would have asked for this. I never would have even dreamed of putting you through what she did. What happened with her is one of the biggest regrets in my life and if I could take it back, I would—”

“Take what back?” I ask, shocked at how tortured he looks, how remorseful. Usually, those are the last two adjectives I’d ever use for Hudson.

“I made a mistake,” he tells me. “I teased her one day, not long before I died. Told her she’d love me forever. I was joking, just playing around, but-...” He shakes his head. “I don’t get to do that. I knew better but I forgot for one second, and all this happened.” He holds his hands out helplessly.

“I’m trying to fix what I can,” he tells me. “I swear, Grace, the last thing I want to do right now is hurt you—or anyone. You just have to trust me. And if you try to kill the beast before the Trial, you’re going to die. If not by it then by the Trial when you drag your broken ass into the arena.”

I can feel his ~~pain~~despair, feel his agitation, and despite everything, I ~~do~~ believe him. More, I realize, I’ve believed him for a while now.

“That’s not true,” I tell the group. “We have the four items. We could let Hudson out right now. That would give us ~~three~~two days to recover all of our strength and train really hard, so we’ll actually have a chance of not dying.” I ~~tell them~~nod. “It’s the best option.”

“Over my dead fucking body,” Jaxon replies, ice dripping from every word he bites out.

Commented [ep19]: Need to end on a hook, but feel free to reword.

Chapter 91

~~“For who?”~~Best option for who exactly?” Flint demands, jaw tight and eyes blazing. “Not for the rest of us, that’s for damn sure.”

“I’m with Flint,” Eden says. “We can’t do that. We can’t let Hudson, with his power of persuasion, out in the world again. We just can’t.”

“I understand that you’re scared—” I start.

“We’re not scared,” Macy says. “We’re practical. We lived through Hudson once, and Jaxon and the rest of the Order finally found a way to bring him down. There’s no way we can risk letting him loose again. No way we can justify risking so many people’s lives just because it’s expedient for us.”

“What about risking our lives?” I ask. “Going against the Unkillable Beast isn’t going to be easy. One of us could die—”

“It’s worth it,” Xavier says quietly, his voice and eyes as serious as I’ve ever seen them.

“Dying is worth it?” I repeat flatly. “Seriously?”

“Do you know how many people he killed?” Mekhi asks. “How many wolves and made vampires died because of Hudson? Because he thought born vampires were the most important species on the planet?”

“That’s not what happened,” Hudson tells me, and there’s an underlying urgency in his voice. “I told you that, Grace.”

~~“I know you did. But are you really sure that’s even what happened.”~~“?” I ~~assure him~~ask the group.
~~“But that doesn’t mean I can convince them, Hudson. Have you ever stopped to ask why he caused all those people to murder each other? If there was a justifiable reason?”~~

Jaxon narrows his gaze at me. “You’re starting to believe whatever lies he’s been feeding you, aren’t you, Grace? You know he can’t be trusted.”

I shake my head. I can feel Jaxon's anger—and betrayal—through our mating bond, and my heart is aching for him. I'm about to say more, but I realize Jaxon can't allow himself to hear me, to believe that he might have killed his own brother by mistake. So I turn to the rest of our group. My only hope is to convince one of them.

"What if we bring him back and it turns out he's been planning to start his insane crusade all over again?" Gwen asks. "How do we live with ourselves?"

"Yes, because that's what I've been doing. Plotting for months on how to destroy the world." He shakes his head. "Who do they think I am? Dr. Evil?"

I ignore him because I know I only have a couple of minutes to make my case or they're going to move on, whether I want them to or not. So I look from person to person and ask try to explain, "Cyrus was organizing an army of made vampires, and others, to start another war. Hudson was only trying to prevent an even bigger catastrophe. I'm not saying I agree with his methods, but I believe him when he says he was doing the right thing. He only turned Cyrus's allies against each other."

Flint looks like I hit him with a truck. "Are you blaming *my brother* for what Hudson did?" I have never seen Flint really mad before, and as he raises up to his full dragon height, I have to say, I hope I never see it again. He's not threatening me in any way, but yeah. He is pissed. "Is he telling you my family was aligned with that power hungry fucking monster?" How do we live with ourselves if we just strip away one of the most important parts of his identity? Of who he is?" I answer. "Think about if someone took your wolf." I turn to Flint and Eden. "Or your dragons? Imagine if you woke up one day and this huge part of what makes you you, is gone because someone decided you don't deserve it. That it doesn't belong to you even though it is you?"

"Your brother most certainly was," Hudson replies, but I ignore him. "Had a nasty temper and hated being boxed in by humans."

"That's not what I'm saying, Flint," I try to calm him down. "But I *am* saying there may be more to this story than you know. I believe him. Does that count for anything?"

"You don't know what you're talking about," Jaxon finally chimes in.

Commented [ep20]: I'm not sure if this is 100% but I gotta think this would make even the unflappable Flint hell mad.

"Excuse me?" I stare at him. "What exactly does *that* mean?"

"You have Hudson whispering in your head, trying to trick you—"

"You really think I'm that ~~stupidly~~? That I don't know my own mind?" I ask. ~~"You think I can't tell the difference between reality and illusion?"~~

"I think you're human—"

"But I'm not only human,!" I shoot back. "Am I? At least, not any more than the rest of you. So why does my opinion matter less?"

"Because you weren't there," Jaxon tells me, and he sounds exasperated. Which is fine with me, because I'm way beyond exasperated at this point. ~~Not that that seems to matter to him.~~ Either because he doesn't know that he's offended me or he doesn't care—neither of which is particularly okay in my opinion. "You didn't see what we saw."

"Maybe not, but none of you have seen what I have either. Hudson has been in my head for a week and a half, ~~twenty-four seven.~~ You think I don't know who he is now? You think I can't recognize ~~whether he's changed or not~~ a psychopath when I see one?"

"It doesn't matter if you think he's ~~changed~~ innocent," Flint says. "The risk is too great. We can't let him have his powers. Who knows what he'll do with them next?"

"So you think we have the right to play judge and jury?" I ask. "I think he deserves a chance."

"The truth is, Grace, it doesn't matter what you think," Jaxon tells me. "Because you're outvoted, seven to one."

I stare at him incredulously for long seconds, then glance around the room to see if anyone else thinks he sounds as autocratic as I do. But they all just look back at me solemnly. Which just pisses me off more.

I take a deep breath, try to calm down enough to be rational. Which is hard when my friends are all looking at me like I'm ~~being ridiculous~~ an idiot. Worse, a non-paranormal.

Though I'm not surprised by their stance. Not really. If I'd lived through what they did, I'd likely feel the same about a new girl at school who wants to set the psychopath that gives them nightmares free.

But Jaxon... ~~My heart is breaking and I'm fighting tears as I finally choke out. When I can finally think—~~
~~finally breathe—without wanting to scream, I ask, “Why are we doing this?”~~

Commented [ep21]: Could make this more emotional, hit harder

~~“We already told you—” Flint starts, but I cut him off.~~

~~“No. I mean, why are we getting all of these items to begin with?”~~

~~“To get Hudson out of your head.” Jaxon looks at me like he’s suddenly concerned my amnesia~~
~~has come back.~~

~~But he gave me the answer I was looking for, so I don’t care. “Right. He’s in my head. My head.~~
~~And you honestly think it’s okay to stand there and say that I don’t know what I’m talking about? That~~
~~I’ve been outvoted when it’s my mind and body that you’re trying so hard to liberate? As if you get more~~
~~of a vote over it than I do?”~~

~~“We don’t get a vote over your mind and body, Grace,” Maey says. “Of course we don’t. But we~~
~~do get a vote over what Hudson is when we bring him back.”~~

~~“It sure seems like you’re splitting hairs to me. Are you really not going to take your mate’s side,~~
~~Jaxon?”~~

~~“It’s about more than that now and you know it. Or maybe you don’t, but I do.” Jaxon looks at~~
~~the rest of our friends and they all nod as bad as I feel and he reaches for my hands, pulls them close to his~~
~~chest. “I love you, Grace. You know this.” His words are raw, like they’re being pulled from his chest.~~
~~“But I’m sorry if it upsets you, Grace, but we’re doing it. We don’t have a choice. I don’t have a choice. I~~
~~can’t afford to put myself first. Or my mate. It’s my responsibility to keep everyone safe. Their lives are~~
~~in my hands. Don’t ask me to choose.”~~

Commented [ep22]: Again can make this more emotional if you want.

~~I feel like my heart is cleaved in two as tears trickle down my cheeks. I reach up and cup his~~
~~cheek so he knows I understand. This beautiful boy. Always the reluctant prince. Always feeling like the~~
~~weight of the world is on his shoulders. He can’t allow himself to be wrong. Ever.~~

Commented [ep23]: Feel free to make this more emotional. But if SHE forgives him, so will the reader, and I think we get that with this.

Hudson curses, loud and roundly, in my head.

“And if I say I won’t fly off on Flint’s back to this mythical Arctic island with you?” I ~~demand~~
~~ask~~
~~softly.~~ “What then?”

Jaxon swallows but holds my gaze. “Then we go without you.” ~~Jaxon tells me.~~ “~~And if someone~~
~~gets hurt because you were more concerned about a murderer than your friends, than that’s on you, I~~
~~guess. But one way or the other, we’re getting that heart.~~”

Commented [TD24]: We need to change the beginning of the next chapter a little bit, to reflect her frustration and anger with this. God knows I’m pissed as shit on her behalf right now.